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ABSTRACT

A sample of 33 students who had taken a total of 71 occupational non-credit classes at Polk Community College were interviewed by telephone regarding their perceptions of their college experience. Of the students, 30% had completed one course and 57% had completed from two to five courses; reasons given by the 13% who did not complete courses were either personal circumstances or dissatisfaction with instruction. Two-thirds of the students made positive comments regarding the classes in which they enrolled; but only 39% made strictly positive comments about their overall experience. No relationship was found between students' negative or positive evaluation of their experience and later enrollment in credit courses. Regardless of their course experiences, students appraised the college itself very positively. However, they clearly indicated that better educational opportunities could be provided, especially in the area of classroom instruction. As the most frequent criticism of the program was poor teaching, policies were suggested to improve it, including seminars for instructors with inadequate preparation, and employment of regular college faculty in non-credit courses. Other study recommendations included: considering changing occupational courses from non-credit to credit; closer administrative supervision; written student evaluations; and increasing public awareness. (ME)

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Enrollment Patterns of Occupational Non-Credit Students in the Two-year College

by

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Polk Community College

Winter Haven, Florida

JC 780 534

Introduction

The research report which follows is presented in these sections: The Research Problem and Objectives; Research Procedures; Presentation and Analysis of Data; Conclusions and Recommendations.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

In 1977, the Polk Community College Office of Community Services enrolled 7,877 non-credit and non-degree seeking students. The research objectives of this study were to investigate the non-credit occupational students' perception of their Polk Community College experience and their later enrollment pattern. More specifically, data was collected pertaining to the following questions: (1) Did the students define their course experience negatively or positively? (2) Did any relationship exist between the students' negative or positive course experience and their later enrollment in credit courses or degree-seeking programs? (3) Was non-credit enrollment more or less likely if the employer instead of the student paid for the course? (4) What was the students' over-all impression of the Institution following enrollment in the course? (5) Based on the student responses, how could the Institution and the Office of Community Services provide better educational opportunities for the local population?

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Research procedures were established in consultation with the Dean of Instruction, the Director of the Office of Community Services, and instructors employed in the non-credit area. A six-item questionnaire was developed to survey student perceptions by telephone interview. Data was collected from respondents living in several Polk County communities which represented the population served by the Institution. The students interviewed had participated in 14 different occupational non-credit courses in several different programs. Names and telephone numbers were obtained from randomly selected enrollment records of students who registered between 1972 and 1977. Most respondents attended Polk Community College in 1974 and 1975.

Compiling the data required placing 135 telephone calls. It was difficult to contact students who registered for classes over three years ago, and an average of 4.1 calls were necessary to collect each response. The mean time per interview was about 15 minutes because some questions were open-ended and lengthy answers were encouraged. Typical telephone interview procedure was to identify the researcher, verify the respondent's course participation, and ask the questions. While interviewees were told their answers would be quoted, they were guaranteed anonymity in that their names would not appear in this report. Interested observers may consult the studys' list of respondents and their telephone numbers to confirm their participation in this

research, or they may have access to the question answers. But specific answers will not be attributed to specific respondents.

Data collection was discontinued after 33 respondents were interviewed. There were two reasons for this decision: (1) The 33 students had enrolled for a total of 71 occupational non-credit courses, and evaluation of each course experience was recorded. (2) As the following data shows, response patterns were very uniform. Increasing the population size would not increase the data's reliability. In the Presentation and Analysis of Data section which follows, reader clarity will be aided by recalling that the interviewed population size was 33, but that the total number of courses considered was 71.

PRESENTATION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

TABLE 1

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS: "HOW MANY COURSES DID YOU ENROLL IN?" AND "HOW MANY COURSES DID YOU COMPLETE?" (N=71)

Completed course percentage	Did not complete course percentage
87	13

Among the total sample of students surveyed (N=33), 30 percent enrolled and completed one course and 57 percent enrolled and completed from two to five courses. Reasons given by the 13 percent of all students who did not complete their courses were either personal circumstances (6 percent) or dissatisfaction with the instructor or classroom presentations (7 percent). Personal circumstances included a change in employment making the course non-beneficial, "business pressures", and that the course time conflicted with a club meeting. Student comments related to dissatisfactions in the classroom follow: "the material was too advanced for the (ability) level of students", "didn't need such a broad coverage of material", "class discussions degenerated into 'war stories' which the teacher did not stop", and "terrible instructor-many people were unhappy." The responses indicate a very high completion rate and a very low dropout pattern because of student dissatisfaction with the level of instruction. As Table 2 and 3 demonstrates, however, students completing the course were not always entirely satisfied with the instructional level.

Table 2 reports the students' negative or positive evaluation of the 71 courses they enrolled in. Student comments about specific courses are quoted following the Table.

TABLE 2

STUDENTS EVALUATION OF ALL COURSES ENROLLED IN

All Positive Comments Percentage	Both Negative and Positive Comments Percentage	All Negative Comments Percentage
66	31	3

POSITIVE COURSE REACTIONS

CPS Review:

"Super experience and thorough preparation."

Principles of Real Estate:

"Very pleased with course. Excellent teacher, materials and classroom presentations."

Starting a Small Business:

"Good course, I was satisfied."

Principles of Banking:

"Good course and teacher."

Real Estate Zoning:

"Fine course and very helpful to my work."

Florida Water and Pollution Control Operators Associations Course

"Outstanding."

"Helpful."

"Very helpful for job."

"Teachers were supervisors and knew our language; the material related to certification which state required."

A.I.B.

"All three courses were valuable and worthwhile. They were taught by bankers who had the experience in banking that was necessary to teach the class. Good level of instruction."

"Bankers taught the courses and that was good as we needed information from experienced bankers. Bankers are necessary to teach about banking."

Landscaping

"Enjoyed it."

EKG for Nurses

"A good experience. The material was useful and appropriate, and the teacher was prepared."

NEGATIVE COURSE REACTIONS

Advanced EKG

"Teacher knew information, but:
(1) Course was poorly planned and presented.

(2) Basic points were covered over and over again.

(3) Material was not advanced enough for the course.

(4) Everybody was bored; we did learn, but we could have learned more."

"Very poor teacher. Knew material well, but presented it very poorly. It was a chore to attend class."

"Poor instructor, material poorly presented. Seemed prepared, but did not get information across. Several students complained; two-thirds dropped out."

"The material was not advanced enough for the class. Attendance policy was unfair - if missed one class you were dropped. Still it was a good experience."

Transportation and Traffic Management

"A good experience overall, but the instructor could have done a better job and more classroom materials to discuss were needed."

C.P.S. Review

"Good instructor and good preparation for exams. Classroom materials used could have included a wider range of supplementary materials which would have been useful."

"Class would not help to pass test as there was just too much material to cover. Still, a good experience."

Management For Supervisors

"Instructor worked in a hospital and taught how to run a hospital. I wanted to learn management and supervision in general."

A.I.B. Economics

"Bad teacher, just couldn't get the material across."
"A poor teacher did a poor job, and I got little out of it. The teacher was prepared, but he just couldn't teach it."

A.I.B. Installment Credit

"Poor teacher in all respects."

Real Estate Zoning

"Good to adequate material coverage, but it could have been better. The teacher was prepared and tried, but it was his first time teaching and obviously lacked experience."

"Poor course - needed more coverage of material in depth."

"The teacher was prepared and knew the material, but class discussions degenerated into 'war stories' which the teacher did not stop."

Income Tax Review

"Didn't need such a broad coverage. The course was well taught but it was not suited to my needs. They (PCC) do use qualified people, though not the best available in the area."

Fla. Water and Pollution Control Operators Association Course

"Very well taught, informative and professional instruction, but also:

(1) Need more visual aids - alot more could be done.
(2) Need more bench work.
(3) Need more emphasis on wast water treatment.

(4) A bibliography of reference works would be helpful.

(5) Courses should be offered more often.

"Excellent teacher, material 100 percent relevant, although:

(1) Need more bench work.

(2) Need more field trips.

(3) Polk Vocational had a similar course and it was much less helpful.

Principles of Real Estate

"I dropped out after two classes because at the first meeting the class was told to read two chapters for the next time. At the second meeting of the class, we never discussed the material and took a test over it. So I dropped out."

Table 3 reports the students' overall negative or positive evaluation of their experiences in Community Services courses. Student comments follow the Table.

TABLE 3

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "HAVE YOU HAD AN OVERALL NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE EXPERIENCE IN COMMUNITY SERVICES COURSES?"

Overall Positive Experience Percentage	Overall Positive and Negative Experience Percentage	Overall Negative Experience Percentage
39	55	6

Student Comments

"Super experience, through preparation; I can say nothing but good things about my experiences."

"Good experience and materials; excellent teachers."

"Full-time faculty do a better teaching job than part-time non-professionals."

"Good experience, but Polk Community College could do better, in some cases, in the area of banking."

"Business machines courses need more machines; I never got to use some of them and learning how to operate them was the purpose of the course."

"Depending on the area, it would be better to use trained teachers in courses such as economics instead of insurance salesmen I had. On the other hand, it is better to use bankers to teach banking."

"I've found after 5 non-credit courses, that what I get out of a course depends on the teacher. If the teacher is a full-time faculty member, I get more out of the course. If the teacher is a banker, I get less out of it because they have not been trained to teach."

"I completed five non-credit courses and my overall experience was just average. Three of the five instructors were poor; two were outstanding. The poor instructors used old textbooks that were at least ten years out of date. Much material was irrelevant and we already knew it. Little lecture was used and then we went over questions at the end of the chapter - very boring. Instructors too often just babysit - they just sit while students read the text. Textbooks should be improved and teachers better supervised." (This student had already completed two years at the University of Florida before these courses were taken.)

Table 4 reports the percentage of students who enrolled in credit courses after their non-credit experience (N=33).

TABLE 4

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "DID YOU ENROLL IN ANY CREDIT COURSES AFTER ENROLLING IN THE NON-CREDIT COURSE?"

Yes - at P.C.C. Percentage	Yes - not at P.C. C. Percentage	No Percentage
15	3	82

The most common reason given by students for not enrolling in credit courses was the lack of spare time (six responses), that credit courses were not necessary to perform their jobs (seven responses) and two other respondents already completed M.A. Degrees. As two student responses especially relate to the objectives of this study, they are quoted here:

> "If I'd had a better experience in five non-credit courses, I probably would have taken credit courses before now. I still may enroll, however, because I need a few hours to complete the A.A."

> "I was disappointed in my non-credit experience, but this would not prevent me from taking credit courses in the future. I knew the non-credit teacher was a banker and not a full-time member."

These responses indicate that the reason non-credit students do not enroll in credit courses is unrelated to their perception of their non-credit experience. Table 5 also supports this conclusion (N=33).

TABLE 5

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "DO YOU PLAN ON ENROLLING IN ANY CREDIT COURSES IN THE FUTURE?"

Yes, at P.C.C. Percentage	Yes, but not at P.C.C. Percentage	Maybe Percentage	No Percentage
36	3	36	24

Table 6 indicates that the great majority of non-credit students responded very positively when asked for comments about Polk Community College. Student comments made about the School follow the table.

Table 6

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "DO YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE ABOUT POLK COMMUNITY COLLEGE?" (N=33)

Positive Comments Percentage	Both Positive and Negative Comments Percentage	Negative Comments Percentage
91	9	0

"Best two-year college anywhere; it has a good reputation."

"Doing a good job; I'm fairly satisfied with it."

"Good school, but I'm not impressed with the nursing program because: 1) two years is just too short period to cover so much material, and 2) some graduates are incompetent."

"No fault with School at all, but as a nurse, I don't like the nursing program because two years is too brief a period, and they stress the wrong things, such as history, which is not needed to be a good nurse."

"Well run school."

"Polk Community College does great. Offers appealing courses."

"I can only praise it highly."

"I've enjoyed Polk Community College. Its great and convenient because I can fit my classes in around my work schedule."

"The School is good, but not challenging enough. Too many of the full-time faculty are dull, very rigid, closed to new ideas, and seldom encourage class participation."

"Good experiences there with both credit and non-credit courses."

"Polk Community is doing very well. I teach in the area and encourage my students to attend."

Polk Community College is a fine place and is doing a good job."

"Excellent School. I enjoyed every minute I attended. Its marvelous. The teachers are very cooperative."

"A real asset to Winter Haven and Polk County. For an area this size, we're fortunate to have it."

"Good teacher-student relationships. The small classes are valuable."

"A good thing."

"I enjoy Polk Community College. It's an asset to the community."

"A fine School"

"A good School and an asset to Winter Haven."

"I think its great; before you had to go away to attend school, now I can work and attend nights."

"I have no negative comments."

"Really a marvelous School. You can get an education much cheaper than at a four-year school. I especially enjoyed the credit courses (in comparison to two non-credit courses)."

"Polk Community College is a bargain (in terms of cost). How can they do it for so little?"

"Polk Community College is outstanding."

Table 7 describes the relationships between the students' overall positive or negative perception of their experiences in Community Services non-credit courses, whether they enrolled in credit courses, and the comments they made about the School. This table combines the data earlier presented in Tables 3, 4, and 6, and shows the relationships between them.

TABLE 7

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE STUDENTS NON-CREDIT COURSE EXPERIENCE, THEIR ENROLLMENT IN CREDIT COURSES, AND THEIR PERCEPTION OF THE SCHOOL (N=33)

Students Experience in Non-Credit Courses Percentage	Credit Enrollment Percentage		Overall Perception of the School Percentage		
Positive (N=13) 39	No (N=11) 85	Yes (N=2) 15	Positive (N=12) 92	Mixed (N=1) 8	Negative 0
Both Positive and Negative (N=18) 55	No (N=15) 83	Yes (N=3) 17	Positive (N=16) 89	Mixed (N=2) 11	Negative 0
Negative (N=2) 6	No (N=1) 50	Yes (N=1) 50	Positive (N=2) 100	Mixed 0	Negative 0

Table 7 shows no relationship was found between the students perception of their non-credit course experience, whether they later enrolled in credit courses, and their perception of the School.

Table 8 reports whether the student or their employer paid for the course they enrolled in.

TABLE 8

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "DID YOU OR YOUR EMPLOYER PAY FOR THE COURSE?" (N=33)

Employer Paid Percentage	Student Paid Percentage
61	39

Table 9 shows that for most students, it did not matter whether they, or their employer paid for the course.

TABLE 9

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "WOULD YOUR ENROLLMENT IN A NON-CREDIT COURSE DEPEND ON WHETHER YOU OR YOUR EMPLOYER PAID FOR IT?"

Yes Percentage	No Percentage
33	61

Most students who responded affirmatively in Table 9 specified that the employer must pay for the course only if they were uninterested, or if the course would not be helpful in performing their jobs. Most students responding negatively to the question indicated that it would not matter who paid for the course if they

were interested or if it would help for performing their job.

Table 10 reports the percentage of students who did have the opportunity to evaluate the non-credit course they enrolled in. (N=16). The population surveyed in response to this item is smaller than the original number because student comments early in the study indicated the question was appropriate. The same rational applies to Table 11.

TABLE 10

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "DID YOU COMPLETE ANY EVALUATION OF THE COURSE YOU ENROLLED IN?"

Yes Percentage	No Percentage	Some Courses Yes and Some No Percentage
31	56	13

Table 11 evidences that most students would like the opportunity to evaluate the non-credit course they enrolled in (N=16).

TABLE 11

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "WOULD YOU LIKE TO EVALUATE THE COURSES YOU ENROLLED IN?"

Yes Percentage	No Percentage	No Opinion Percentage
85	0	15

Research Conclusions

1. The 33 students defined their non-credit classroom experiences both positively and negatively. While two-thirds of the students expressed positive recollections of each course they had enrolled in, nearly one-third made both positive and negative comments. Compared to their appraisal of all 71 courses, they had enrolled in, their reactions were much less positive. Only 39 percent were completely positive, while 55 percent made both negative and positive comments. The factor most often mentioned by students as determining whether their course experience was negative or positive was the quality of instruction. A "good" course evaluation inevitably included reference to "good" teaching. A "poor" course reaction just as often mentioned a negative evaluation of the quality of instruction. This data supports two conclusions. The first conclusion in that too often "bad" teachers have performed poorly in the non-credit classroom. The second conclusion is that while a need for improving some teachers effectiveness clearly exists, Community Services instructors in many instances have performed very well in the classroom.

2. Student response patterns definitely establish that no relationship exists between their negative or positive evaluation of their non-credit course experience and their later enrollment in credit courses or degree-seeking programs. Nor was a relationship established between the students perception of their course experience and their evaluation of the School.

Four reasons for these conclusions were found: (1) The reasons given for not enrolling in credit courses were completely personal. Students had not enrolled because they lacked spare time or that credit courses were not needed in their present jobs. (2) Never did a negative respondent indicate they expected another negative experience if they enrolled again. (3) To a surprising degree, students were very forgiving for negative course experiences. For example, poor instruction was often attributed to a lack of teaching experience. In addition, the School was never considered directly responsible for inferior teaching or use of irrelevant materials. (4) Without exception and regardless of their previous experiences, students would enroll in future credit or non-credit courses if they believed the course would be helpful in doing their job or if they were interested in doing so. It should be pointed out that all of these conclusions were contrary to this researchers bias when the study began.

3. It made no difference to the students whether they paid the fee for the course or the employer paid it. This conclusion provides, however, that: (1) the student wanted to take the course or (2) the student believed the course would be helpful in performing better on the job.

4. Regardless of how the students evaluated their course experiences, Polk Community College was appraised very positively.

5. Student reactions clearly indicate that the Institution and the Office of Community Services could provide better educational opportunities in the future than it has in the past. Classroom instruction is the most obvious single area needing improvement. How this might be accomplished, and suggestions for other improvements, are considered next.

Research Recommendations

The recommendations which follow are presented in two sections. The first section consists of suggestions made by students; the second section includes recommendations based on the data collected in this research.

Student Suggestions

1. "Mail notices to people who previously enrolled, informing them of what courses will be offered in related areas the following term. I've not seen the course offered that I need to take for a year. It's just too easy to miss such an announcement that appears once in the newspaper."

2. "7:00 p.m. may be a better starting time for evening classes than 6:30 p.m."

3. "Those hard chairs with desks attached to them get uncomfortable after three hours, especially for us older people. Could a long table with three chairs per table be arranged?"

4. "Polk Community College should offer courses in pumping systems dealing with topics such as irrigation of lawns, citrus irrigation, sewage lift stations, electronic control of pumping stations, and utility devices."

5. "Why not offer canoeing or camping courses in the evening? It's too dark much of the year to do so, but there is plenty of daylight left during summer evenings and it could be done then. I'd love to take both of them."

6. "I'd like to see data processing courses for advanced students offered. However, maybe there are not enough other students wanting them to make it practical."

7. "The school needs to expand course offerings in the banking area to include: foreign banking practices, trusts, real estate banking and long-term loans (such as home mortgages), instead of just short-term installment credit."

Research Recommendations

1. A frequent question from students concerned the possibility of changing the status of occupational courses, which presently are non-credit to credit. Whether this policy change should be implemented is beyond the scope of this study. Whether changing

the status of occupational non-credit courses to credit would have any impact on credit enrollments is not clear from this data. The recommendation is that this request at least be considered in appropriate occupational courses.

2. The most often mentioned criticism of non-credit occupational courses was poor classroom teaching. As noted earlier, many instructors were praised by students for outstanding teaching, but many were not. Further, the students' perception of the quality of instruction was the factor most related to an overall positive or negative course assessment. The recommendation is that the Office of Community Services establish policies designed to achieve an improved and more uniform level of instruction. While several alternative policies could improve teaching effectiveness, the following four related recommendations are appropriately suggested by this data.

3. A unique characteristic of non-credit occupational programs, compared to more traditional academic areas, is the use of non-professional educators. The advantage is course content geared toward providing practical occupational information related to developing employment skills. The disadvantage is an instructor usually lacking a background in knowing how to prepare classroom presentations and experience in presenting the material. The recommendation is that seminars be conducted, whenever appropriate, for instructors without adequate teaching preparation. Topics covered in the seminars could include: (1) techniques of teaching; (2) the media, duplication, and secretarial assistance available;

(3) how to prepare a block of material for presentation; and (4) how best to use presentation aids such as overlays, handouts, and films.

4. Students were aware whether their instructor was a professional educator or not, and indicated that full-time faculty did a better job teaching than instructors from business or industry. The recommendation is that Polk Community College faculty be employed in occupational non-credit courses when possible. This recommendation assumes, however, that faculty members are interested, willing, and have the background necessary to do a good job. One potential problem of implementing this recommendation is that faculty members may not be willing to teach non-credit courses in addition to their other duties, for the standard $11.00 per hour rate. This may be especially true when the preparation time, which is always extensive for teaching a new course, is considered. Three possibilities could overcome this difficulty: (1) Abandon the hourly rate for full-time faculty, and corrilate remuneration with their contract rate which reflects their degrees and experience. (2) Increase the hourly rate for full-time faculty. (3) Pay faculty for preparation time. While the data shows no relationship between the student's non-credit experience and their later credit enrollment, a professional responsibility of any school is to provide the best instruction possible in all areas. The seminars recommended above for non-professionals and using professional educators when possible, would improve the level of instruction.

5. Much closer supervision of non-credit courses is needed. The impression from student comments is that greater uniformity is needed in the process of hiring instructors, supervising their classroom presentations, and evaluating their performances. In some instances past policy has been inconsistent, uncoordinated, and noneffective. The result has been an uneven level of instruction. As these difficulties are instructional, the Director of the Office of Community Services and the Dean of Instruction should work closely with non-credit teachers and the teachers' supervisors to implement policies designed to improve instructional effectiveness. Administrators should not wait for student complaints before acting or respond to a poor teaching job just by not hiring the person in the future. Pre-and post-course conferences with the instructor and classroom visitations by supervisors would be helpful.

6. Written student evaluations at the completion of each course are needed. There are three reasons for this recommendation: (1) Student evaluations are one method of measuring teacher effectiveness and promoting self-improvement. (2) Evaluations would aid administrators in assessing the level of instruction. (3) Students were found to want to evaluate their courses.

7. The impression from this data is that at present the Office of Community Services may be under-staffed. The recommendation is that this issue be investigated further, particularly if the earlier recommendations regarding increased supervision are implemented.

8. The only mention of non-credit occupational course fees by students were references to how inexpensive it was for course enrollment. What various courses should cost is an issue beyond the confines of this study, but student responses suggest that increasing fees probably would not be offensive nor diminish student enrollments. The recommendation is that the present fee structure be examined to determine its appropriateness.

9. Non-credit course enrollments could increase through publicity efforts designed to better inform the community of course offerings and class schedules. In some instances, a publicity gap was found to exist which could be overcome by mailing course schedules to recently enrolled students. The recommendation is that this and other methods of increasing public awareness of non-credit course offerings be considered.

10. The final recommendation is that follow-up evaluations of this type be done in the future. Student reactions to this research were positive in every case; former students were gratified that the School was interested in how they appraised their experiences.

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